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Teaching assistants in the Literacy Hour: 'managing children's time' or 'extending their knowledge'?

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Abstract

Through an examination of writing done by teaching assistants for an Open University course, this paper examines assistants' perceptions of their role in children's learning within the context of the Literacy Hour. There is an analysis of three themes arising from the data i.e. assistants' practice aimed at increasing children's participation; assistants' pedagogic and subject knowledge; and the nature of assistants' team working with teachers. The data suggests that teaching assistants are very involved in working with the most vulnerable and 'difficult to teach' children and that they use a range of intermediary techniques and pedagogic strategies to enable these children to participate in the Literacy Hour. The data lends support to the official view of the role of teaching assistants i.e. that, guided by teachers, they 'enable the teacher to teach' and 'support children's learning'. However, the data also suggests that teaching assistants teach too, sometimes with a degree of independence. Indeed, the variety (and in some cases sophistication) of ways in which teaching points are developed by them with children appears to signify a clear pedagogic role in terms of extending children's knowledge of literacy.

Background

The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) and the Framework for Teaching (DfEE, 1998) were introduced into schools in England in 1998 as part of the incoming Labour government's programme to improve standards in primary schools. The Strategy conceptualises literacy as a set of skills and skills-related knowledge, set out in an atomistic 'Framework' (DfEE, 1998) as hundreds of discrete items (objectives) to be taught in a prescribed sequence during the seven years of primary education (i.e. for ages 4–11 years). Objectives are classified into 'word level work' (phonics, spelling and vocabulary), 'sentence level work' (sentence grammar and punctuation) and 'text level work' (comprehension and composition).

The view of literacy embedded in the documentation is in keeping with Street's (1984) conception of 'autonomous' models of literacy. Such models support the belief that literacy can be broken down into component parts to be transmitted from the teacher (or from government) to the learner. Previous discussions with teaching assistants have given us the strong impression that they increasingly see themselves as links in a chain of transmission, 'delivering' literacy.

In the NLS, the use of teaching time is also strictly prescribed as 'The Literacy Hour'. As outlined in the Framework, this requires half an hour of 'whole class' shared reading and writing and word level work, twenty minutes of 'guided group and independent' work and a final ten-minute plenary. The Strategy is supported by schemes of work, lesson plans, activities and worksheets provided by a national government-funded organisation (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) and numerous commercial publishers.

The Strategy (together with the National Numeracy Strategy) has now been subsumed within the Primary National Strategy (DfES, 2003), which counsels a degree of flexibility, whilst still, however, retaining the (unrevised) Framework.

Whilst the Framework makes reference to speaking and listening, objectives refer only to skills and knowledge used in reading and writing. More recent training materials (QCA/DfES, 2003) support the inclusion of speaking and listening objectives into lesson plans, but speaking and listening do not feature in the national tests which have been crucial in ensuring schools and teachers adhere to the Framework.

The introduction of the Foundation Stage Curriculum for 3–5 year olds (QCA/DfEE, 2000) has possibly reduced the formal teaching of literacy in Reception classes, though in some schools, the downward pressure of the primary curriculum has helped preserve it. The proposed Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum (DfES, 2006) for 0–5 year olds, dovetails with the primary curriculum and includes detailed guidance on literacy teaching, including specific phonic knowledge to be taught and learnt by the age of 5 (DfES, 2006, p. 51).

Government-commissioned evaluations (Earl et al., 2000, 2001, 2003) praise the comprehensive nature of the Strategy but are more cautious with regard to its impact on learning. They share Ofsted's (2001, 2002) conclusion, however, that it is teachers who must do more to make the Strategy effective; neither questions the Strategy itself. Concerns have been raised about Earl et al.'s objectivity (Goldstein, 2000) and also Ofsted's vested interests (see Hancock and Eyres, 2004).

Although never statutory, 'with inspection in mind, few schools dared reject the Strategy' and 'in meetings and workshops all over the country, anxious teachers were asking 'Are we allowed to?' (Merry, 2004, p. 19). In the light of this, it is ironic that the national inspection body has recently (Ofsted/HMI, 2005) judged that 'teacher's planning focuses too much on covering the many objectives in the NLS *Framework for teaching*, instead of meeting pupils' specific needs'.

The autonomous model of literacy prescribed takes little account of recent research and scholarship, for example the notion of literacy as 'social practice' (New London Group, 1996) to be understood as 'a socially, culturally and historically situated tool used for particular purposes in particular contexts' (Myhill and Fisher, 2005 p. 1).

The 'critical literacies' perspective (Street, 2003), which sees literacy as socially situated and crucially influenced by issues of power and status is similarly ignored. This perspective is particularly relevant to the education of 'unempowered' groups (e.g. ethnic minorities, those with special educational needs and the socio-economically disadvantaged). Whilst the QCA speaking and listening materials (QCA/DfES, 2003) at least acknowledge research into the significant contribution of talk to literacy learning (see Myhill and Fisher, 2005), the growing importance of new technologies and of multi-modal forms of literacy (QCA, 2004) is hardly recognised in official guidance for literacy teaching. In contrast, the government's

determination to enforce the teaching of synthetic phonics as the unique first step to literacy (Rose, 2006) demonstrates that atomistic, decontextualised, bottom-up approaches to literacy remain in the ascendant.

Originally the role of ‘other adults’ (i.e. *any* adults other than the class teacher) received little attention in the Framework for Teaching (DfEE, 1998) and, despite the considerable growth in the number of primary teaching assistants throughout the 1990s (Hancock et. al. 2002), most were not involved in the original NLS training initiatives. The DfEE Induction Training for Teaching Assistants (DfEE, 2000), offered guidance on working in the Literacy Hour, which, in common with other early guidance, cast them in an ancillary role. More recently-introduced ‘catch up’ packages such as Additional Literacy Support (ALS) (DfEE, 1999) and Early Literacy Support (ELS) (DfEE, 2001) have given teaching assistants direct responsibility for specific areas of learning for children in designated groups.

The accounts which form the basis of this study come from a time (2003–4) when the National Literacy Strategy was firmly embedded in schools’ practice and support packages had been available for use for some time. The Primary National Strategy document, *Excellence and enjoyment* and the QCA/DfES speaking and listening materials had only recently arrived in schools.

The study

A recent review of the research literature on support staff in primary classrooms suggests the voices of teaching assistants are not well represented (Cajkler et al., 2006). In this study we draw upon insider accounts in order better to understand the nature of assistants’ work.

This study focussed on an analysis of 40 accounts of Literacy Hour practice written as assessed coursework by teaching assistants following the Open University’s Specialist Teacher Assistant Certificate course during the academic year 2003 -2004. The 40 scripts were randomly selected from a student group of some 400 working in primary schools across England. Sixty percent of the assistants were working in Reception or Key Stage 1 (5–8 year olds) classes.

From the scripts, three aspects of the role were identified as yielding significant data:

- practice intended to increase children’s inclusion/participation;
- assistants’ pedagogic and subject knowledge;
- assistants’ sharing and team working with teachers.

We discuss each of the themes in turn.

Inclusion or increasing participation?

Inclusion implies a radical reform of the school in terms of curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and grouping of pupils. It is based on a value system that welcomes and celebrates diversity arising from gender, nationality, race, language of origin, social background, level of educational achievement or disability.

(Mittler 2000, p. 10)

The majority of teaching assistants in this study emphasised their role in ensuring that children participate in the Literacy Hour. Since a high proportion of the hour involves the teacher teaching ‘from the front’, there are many references in the data to strategies for ensuring that this message has got through, for example, by repeating or re-presenting the teacher’s introduction.

The teacher will also introduce the activities to children, but the teaching assistant taking the group always explains it again.

(Beverley, Reception)

Others report more active involvement, such as checking understanding:

I repeat the teachers' instructions for the benefit of any pupils who are unsure or who have forgotten.

(Maggie, Y3/4)

And linking an activity to children's existing knowledge:

[I] also remind pupils of previous sentence level work and what the focus of the lesson was

(Maggie Y3/4)

The exposition may be developed in the course of a lesson where,

... the teaching assistant will explain in more detail what to do to children who have not fully understood, answer any questions, monitor children's progress and give verbal feedback.

(Beverley, Reception)

Such mediations, interpreting or reinterpreting instructions, appear necessary to enable some children to make sense of didactic, objectives-led teaching.

The data show distinct strategies to encourage participation in each of the sections of the Literacy Hour.

Whole-class teaching

Most of the teaching assistants were present during the whole class teaching sessions, often sitting with children who *'find it difficult to concentrate and stay focussed'* (Helen, Y2) or *'who needed a little extra support to ensure they were paying attention and understood the objective of the lesson'* (Tara, Y1) or children who had been identified as having learning difficulties.

One of the children had speech difficulties and needs me to remind him of some words and repeat a word which he had difficulty pronouncing.

(Fiona, Y4/5)

It was interesting to note how often shy or less confident children – a group not often recognised as in need of support (Beveridge, 1993) were identified. One teaching assistant talked about drawing 'reticent' children in, by 'smiling and nodding' and another about providing 'moral support'. Some talked about drawing the teacher's attention to children wanting to answer questions.

I found that the children needed extra reassurance before they would put their hand up to answer a question; I told them their answer was correct before they shared it with the class.

(Rosemarie, Reception/Y1)

Many saw their role as encouraging or reminding children to listen, concentrate, and stay on task. To this end they would ask questions and provide explanations, encouraging participation at an individual as well as a whole-class level. One teaching assistant said that she encouraged children:

...to just whisper their answers to me. This makes them feel they are being listened to and they can enjoy individual praise without disrupting the whole class.

(Helen, Y2)

Group work

During group work some teaching assistants supported participation whilst offering general support for the whole class.

I supported generally around the classroom, assisting children who requested help, but also making sure those who do not request help were also on the right track.

(Hannah, Y1)

However, most of them worked with specific groups, commonly:

...to keep an eye on the lower ability groups and make sure they understood what was going on.

(Sally, Y6)

When leading a group, most began by giving or reiterating instructions. Some worked alongside the children as a more experienced 'other', carrying out work set by the teacher. A number talked about providing help with spellings and reminding children about strategies they had already learnt. Some took a more active teaching role, for example modifying the task or acting as scribes for individuals or groups '*so that they are able to get on like the rest of the children*'. One suggested that this helped by enabling children to focus on the meaning rather than the mechanics of writing. One commented that she sometimes changes tasks to 'get them to achieve an activity to the best of their ability' e.g., each writing a segment of a story. Examples of this kind of differentiation were few. Another said:

I found that giving the child a slightly easier task which is more attainable gives the child the confidence to attempt the activity, doing it this way means I can extend it as the child goes along but doing it at the child's own individual ability, so hopefully the child never feels out of control.

(Barbara Y5/6)

The plenary

Many teaching assistants reported preparing children for the plenary. Often, with their group, they would recap the learning objectives and rehearse children's contributions. There was a strong sense that this was an important time for the children they worked with, with praise being a critical element.

The plenary is a shared celebration of the children's work. When asked how the activity went for my group I re-affirm how well they had done and encourage the children to say how they enjoyed it.

(Gill, Y4)

Reading aloud in the plenary seems to boost their confidence especially when their peers agree they have done a good piece of work.

(Barbara Y5/6)

My group stood by me as they read and I was able to give them help if they needed it. They seemed very proud of their work.

(Rosemarie, Y1)

Teaching assistants can provide a safety net for teachers concentrating on whole-class achievement of objectives:

I say well done even if they hadn't been chosen by the teacher.

(Tara, Y1)

Some teaching assistants explicitly noted the importance of their support and encouragement to children who might otherwise feel excluded in this part of the lesson. They also commented on the importance of reporting to the teacher their observations of children's achievements.

It is important for these children to take part in the plenary session because it gives them a sense of being part of the class and helps to build their confidence.

(Emily, Y3)

During the plenary I prompt and encourage pupils as to how they may contribute and feedback their progress to the teacher.

(Maggie, Y3/4)

The data include many references to managing behaviour and show teaching assistants engaged in mentoring of and advocacy for pupils, all of which may be seen as supporting children's ability to take part. Although arguably an inclusive approach, it falls short of Mittler's definition, which heads this section. No doubt the architects of the Strategy would argue that it is indeed a 'radical reform' and one of its axioms is that much of its teaching time is spent on *whole*-class activity, with *all* children expected to take part. Subsequent guidance and initiatives such as ALS however, largely call on teaching assistants to 'bridge the gap' to members of frequently excluded groups, when 'giving them all the same' clearly isn't working. There is much evidence in our data of teaching assistants working hard to find ways of conveying planned objectives to children, but far less that suggests a role in 'welcoming' anything which children bring from their own knowledge, experience and home culture. We also wonder if we are alone in finding the notion of encouraging children publicly '*to say how they enjoyed*' a literacy activity just a little sinister.

Supporting learning – pedagogic and subject knowledge

I feel I worked more as a general support, managing the children's use of time and ensuring the teacher wasn't interrupted. Admittedly this supports learning but not in the sense that I, personally am making a contribution that challenges the children and extends their knowledge.

(Jane, Y1)

If teaching assistants are to consider themselves as professionals or para-professionals rather than simply offering the 'general support' identified by Jane, then we must assume a degree of professional knowledge. The body of literacy knowledge (the objectives) of the literacy Framework constitutes, within Shulman's (1986) model, a body of *Subject content knowledge*. Just as important, however, is *pedagogical content* knowledge: 'the most useful forms of analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations – in a word, the ways of representing and formulating the subject in order to make it comprehensible to others' (Shulman, 1986). We looked, therefore, for illustrations both of what the teaching assistants know about literacy and of what they know about how to make elements of literacy

learnable to the children in their charge. Twiseleton (2006) highlights the relatively low importance of ‘content’ in learning to be literate when she writes:

Learning to be literate is more like learning to drive, in the sense that the pupil is not usually involved in learning to do new things, but rather in doing the same things repeatedly, with increasing insight and skill.

(Twiseleton, 2006, p. 89)

It follows that pedagogic knowledge – the knowledge of strategies which motivate learners to rehearse and develop what they can already do (albeit imperfectly) is vital in supporting literacy learning.

Shulman’s third category, *curriculum knowledge* is evidenced abundantly in references to objectives and to other aspects of the Framework. We had no doubt that these teaching assistants were clear about what it is they are expected to ‘deliver’.

The previous section of this paper refers to teaching assistants’ knowledge of strategies which support learning in a more general, non-subject-specific way, and it is this area we will visit first.

Generic pedagogic knowledge

From their own accounts, it was clear that many of the teaching assistants see themselves as a link in a ‘chain of transmission’ which runs from the DfES (embodied in the National Literacy Strategy framework) via the teacher and assistant to the learner. One key piece of knowledge, therefore, is the learning objectives for any given lesson and an understanding that they are the ineluctable focus of all activity.

... it is important to follow the objective quite tightly. For example: we were looking to improve writing by placing capital letters and full stops. Some children had reversed letters and spelled words wrongly, these areas were to be ignored on the basis that they were not part of the learning objective.

(Hannah, Y1)

Several assistants made reference to their use of ALS and commercially-produced packages which seem designed to reinforce the chain metaphor.

The giving or repeating of instructions for an activity, a very commonly instanced way of acting within this chain, does little to imply knowledge on the part of the teaching assistant. However, actions such as checking understanding and relating an activity to children’s existing knowledge imply not only a greater degree of pedagogic expertise, but (although not made explicit) of subject content knowledge as well.

Another popular way of relaying the teacher’s message involves modelling desired behaviours. Examples range from demonstrating how to complete a worksheet and joining in with *Jolly Phonics* actions (*‘and exaggerating my pleasure when they participated’*) to joining in with class discussions *‘to encourage participation’*.

Re-presentation may involve an element of reinterpretation on the part of the teaching assistant. Two teaching assistants reported writing prepared questions on a whiteboard for a group, as an alternative route to understanding, for example, while others devised games and other participatory activities, which enjoyed some success:

Result of ‘hunt the word game’ [Mrs S.] is particularly pleased that the reluctant writers are participating.

(Mary, Foundation Stage)

Some reformulations suggest significant subject and/or pedagogic knowledge, as well as knowledge of the needs of individual children:

As I was planning for a specific group, I was able to differ (sic) the expected outcome for each individual child. In order to do this, I had to discuss the outcomes with the class teacher in order to carefully plan the lesson.

(Penny, Reception/Y1)

The example above moves us away from pedagogic strategies focussed on learning objectives (with their behaviourist overtones), towards strategies which are more in keeping with a social constructivist approach (Berger and Luckman, 1966); many teaching assistants write about how they took account of children's prior knowledge and many document an incremental approach to support reminiscent of scaffolding strategies (Bruner, 1975). Others describe strategies which help children keep meaning to the fore.

Scaffolding is a term which has been used in a range of ways (Rojas-Drummond and Mercer, 2003), some of which entail little more than prompting and chivvying to obtain desired behavioural outputs, exemplified in our data by:

I contributed to the learning by: repeating instructions, helping with spellings, giving encouragement and reassurance.

(Fiona, Y4/5)

On the other hand, strategies expressed in

We even had chats of our own where appropriate, re meanings of words and discussed the illustrations and plot 'provided.

(Sheila, Y1)

Directing them to points in the script when I noticed they were lost or confused.

(Daphne, Y5)

imply a much stronger engagement with the meaning of the text under scrutiny. Barbara, who on page 9 carefully matches the difficulty of a task to her perception of a child's capacity, then builds up knowledge or skills through tasks of increasing difficulty, so that the child 'never feels out of control' shows how she is engaging with both the task and the individual child.

This final illustrates the theme of agency, which is at least implicit in the practice of a few teaching assistants who report dialogues in which children's contributions are sought and valued, both individually

During the writing I discussed any grammatical errors and corrected spelling, with their help.

(Sarah, Y4)

and in group work

I let the children bounce ideas off me.

(Barbara, Y5/6)

The teaching assistant who wrote

Alice wrote short, simple sentences about her weekend. She needed almost complete spelling support and reassurance during the activity.

(Maureen, Y3/4)

is describing what we would hope is an outdated model of support (one likely to result in complete dependency). In contrast, sensitivity to the delicate balance between the need for independence and the need for support is shown in:

While I left him for short intervals to work independently, I monitored the others in the group returning regularly to [child] to ensure that he stayed on task.

(Paula, Y1)

Collaboration is identified as a valuable strategy for enabling children to clarify thoughts:

I gave them time to collaborate and work out their thoughts.

(Sally, Y6)

I encouraged collaboration as children were finding the task difficult.

(Daphne, Y5)

Knowledge of individual children, their past experience and needs is cited by a number as an important factor in their support:

As I support the same pupils within each Literacy lesson I feel I am in a good position to identify their individual needs and contribute to their learning.

(Linda, Y6)

As already discussed, the preparation of children for the plenary session is seen as a valuable pedagogic strategy.

Subject specific (pedagogic and subject content) knowledge

Most teaching assistants provided evidence of a reserve of language knowledge derived from their own literacy: for example references to spelling, sentence structure and paragraphing probably owe most to this personal knowledge. Identifying knowledge which is expressly 'professional' is more difficult. Many teaching assistants employed a range of metalinguistic terminology, but it is often difficult to see whether this is simply lifted from the language of the Framework or implies some deeper understanding. Comments such as

I communicate with children using different verbs and adverbs

(Sirisha, KS2)

make their writing interesting by using adjectives

(Tara, Y1)

We discussed the appropriate use of grammar they might need, how we might need to use verbs and adjectives

(Maggie, Y3/4)

imply the former.

Often the knowledge is acquired (or 'brushed up') just before the lesson:

Before the lesson the teacher discussed the learning objective with me. She reminded me what a synonym is and gave examples.

(Fiona, Y4/5)

or even *during* the first part of the lesson

My role during this part of the lesson was to observe the teacher and ascertain exactly what the teaching objectives were as well as noting the terminology and strategies she used.

(Geraldine, Y3)

Some examples even reveal misconceptions (e.g. the ‘Dictionary of eponyms’). Others, however, do give evidence of an ability to engage children in a developing explicit understanding of how written language works, through the way they discuss such features as commas in lists, the difference between sentences and captions, reasons for starting a new paragraph, the differences between chronological and non-chronological texts, narrative structure and newspaper layout conventions.

Perhaps not surprisingly, evidence of the most detailed knowledge comes in the area of phonics. Although references to such concepts as initial and medial sounds, long vowels and consonant clusters possibly betoken only superficial understanding, statements like

it was important to monitor the children’s ability to hear and recognise sounds.

(Penny, Reception/Y1)

inspire greater confidence. Conversely, statements like

I organise and teach ALS autonomously to small groups, using the modules and photo-copiable masters provided.

(Sheila, Y1)

cry out for further investigation.

The use of established strategies lends a more pedagogic emphasis to some of the knowledge described. Amongst the general tendency to ‘help with spellings’, one teaching assistant writes of reminding children of *strategies to spell* words, another of *strategies for learning* words, whilst a third shows her knowledge of invented spelling strategies when she talks of observing

which of the children were able to use initial cues and phonic knowledge in order to spell some words.

(Penny, Reception/Y1)

As we have already said, it is often difficult to assess confidently the extent to which claims of subject content knowledge in particular are justified. Some of the teaching assistants in our sample do appear to be kept at arms length by their class teacher, and this may suggest a lack of confidence in their knowledge (though we have argued elsewhere (Hancock and Eyres, 2004) that teaching assistants’ peripheral position has a systematic cause. However, where, as is often the case, teaching assistants have some involvement in planning, assessment and evaluation a valuable degree of understanding is at least implied.

Being part of a shared endeavour

‘Life’ wrote a friend of mine, ‘is a public performance on the violin, in which you must learn the instrument as you go along.’

(Mr Emerson, *A Room with a View*, E.M Foster)

Our discussion so far has brought into focus the back-up role that most teaching assistants in our sample provided for their teachers. This role has been identified in our analysis through the many ways in which assistants enable children’s engagement with the teacher’s teaching,

and also through their reinforcement of children's literacy knowledge as defined by the Strategy and taught by the teacher. In terms of being part of a shared endeavour, this seems to us to be a 'peripheral' (Hancock and Eyres, 2004) contribution that is geared to 'keeping the literacy show on the road', a show that is scripted by government and to be performed (or, to adapt to official metaphor, 'delivered') by lone teachers, the core professionals. However, assistants are being brought in to extend this chain of transmission beyond the teacher in a variety of ways, and this role appears to us to be much more important than is officially recognised.

DfES guidance on working with teaching assistants tells us that 'The teacher will always and rightly be the senior partner in the relationship' (DfES, 2000, p. 25). Knowing one's place and duty as a teaching assistant seems essential to being able to work well within a loosely coupled classroom team; and as Mr Emerson captures above, such a role requires that assistants are skilled at being able to contribute usefully 'as they go along'. The lack of involvement in lesson plans reported widely in our data means assistants need to be strong at second guessing and picking up cues from teachers about 'where this lesson is going'.

Assistants' knowledge of the predictable pattern of the literacy hour, however, appeared to help give them some firm ground for their instinctive and ever-shifting role-making. Additionally, the given and required bureaucracy surrounding the Strategy meant there was a high chance that the teacher had something written down to further help understanding. Our data therefore reveals a considerable emphasis on teaching assistants' intuitive contributions if they were to enter into any form of teamwork with teachers.

Many teaching assistants showed themselves to be acting as the eyes and ears of the teacher, observing children so that they can later report any difficulties children are experiencing. Several also talk about their role in managing behaviour, especially:

while the teacher is talking.

(Beth, Reception)

Occasionally, we picked up developments that that brought a teaching assistant into the endeavour as a more equal colleague. For instance:

Miss P suggested that, during the next carpet session, I would take the lead during the question and answer session.

(Sarah, Y4)

This seemed to advance the nature of the team work – from fitting in and backing up, to co-working and co-presenting part of a lesson.

A small number of assistants highlighted a further level of work-sharing when they ran their own lesson independently of the teacher. This could happen within the classroom but often happened outside. Hancock et al., (2002) found that ninety-one per cent of classroom assistants in two English LEAs said they sometimes withdrew children from classrooms. Sometimes the withdrawn children in the present study received teaching that appeared to be closely modelled on the teacher's approach in the classroom:

I will observe what strategies the class teacher adopts and will repeat this when working with a group outside of the classroom area.

(Bridget, Y1)

However, sometimes it seemed as though an invitation to work autonomously with a small group opened up possibilities for two-way interaction with children and opportunities for the assistant to make her own judgements with regard to children's needs. For instance:

The children struggle to concentrate for long. I would like to introduce a more fun way for them to learn their sounds.

(Hilary, Y1)

Wherever and however assistants worked with children they appeared to be very committed to giving feedback to teachers about children's reactions to a lesson and sometimes gave their thoughts on children's future learning needs. For instance:

The class teacher and myself had a post lesson discussion. I was able to offer a personal perspective of the group's performance.

(Paula, Y1)

Such developments seemed to move towards interdependent and partnership conceptions of team work, although these were not well represented in our data.

Whatever teaching assistants did they often appeared to be aiming to be of unconditional assistance to teachers, and therefore always involved in teamwork of a kind. Nevertheless, the onus was very much on the assistant, the junior partner, to be flexible and to find ways of fitting in to a teacher's world to make collaboration happen.

All 40 teaching assistants in our study seemed to be individually shaping the way in which they entered into a shared endeavour with their respective class teachers. The diversity of both assistant support practice and of forms of teamwork was therefore very considerable.

Although they were always tied to the service of a teacher, assistants did seem to have wide 'job jurisdictions' (Abbott, 1988). Many were clearly in classroom contexts where they were assisting, in a mainly reactive way, in keeping children engaged with the teacher's teaching. A few were doing much more in that they were contributing to the planning and teaching of a specific group of children themselves, perhaps away from the classroom. Some seemed to be performing both of these team roles within the space of one literacy lesson.

Much of the team work described in our data has an organic, informal feeling to – a spontaneous coming together rather than a collaboration that is jointly and formally planned. Teachers were generally aware of what their assistants were doing and offered guidance and advice when possible but, given the need to attend to the demands of their own work, it was important that an assistant could quickly notice what needed doing to support a teacher and then do it without consultation. Our data does not therefore support the officially held view of teaching assistants being formally 'supervised' and 'managed' by a teacher as an all-knowing professional.

Discussion and conclusion

This study addresses the question, what is the developing pedagogic role of teaching assistants supporting children in literacy sessions? Our data suggest that teaching assistants are mainly involved in working with the most vulnerable and 'difficult to teach' children and that they use a range of pedagogic strategies to enable these children to participate in the Literacy Hour. They are involved in mediating the learning for these children. The teaching assistants in our study also spend a considerable amount of time enabling the teacher to focus on teaching by ensuring that children are engaged in the lesson. There is ample evidence in our data of teaching assistants adopting this ancillary role and facilitating the smooth running of the lesson and children's participation. The assistants are therefore involved in supporting children and supporting the teacher – roles clearly defined in guidance and supported by other research findings (Cajkler et al. 2006, Blatchford et al., 2004, Howes et al., 2003). However, it seems to us that teaching assistants are not simply 'enabling the teacher to teach' or 'supporting teaching', as their role is often officially characterised; they are teaching too. The variety (and in some cases sophistication) of ways in which teaching points are developed with children signifies a clear pedagogic role.

The extent to which teaching assistants are able to engage in planning is evident in many accounts. While a few assistants seem to be content with minimal involvement a number clearly used the Open University course activity and assignment, as an opportunity to reflect on and explore this aspect of their role, and the extent to which they are involved appeared to effect the contribution they are able to make in pedagogical terms. Many appear to be learning through observing the teacher at work in terms both of pedagogic strategies and subject content knowledge and some are able to share brief exchanges with the class teacher about the lesson objectives and/or have opportunities to update their grammatical knowledge. However, our data would suggest that this knowledge is not always underpinned by the kinds of understanding that we would wish adults working with young children to be bringing to this task. In saying this we do not intend to criticise teaching assistants.

According to our data, many assistants appear to be learning on the job, often skilfully translating and adapting the teacher's 'direct teaching' to meet the needs of groups and individuals. This implies that the teaching in the whole-class sessions is not so 'direct' as the term implies, since it requires later mediation. The teaching (if teaching is defined as interaction from which learning results, rather than simply sending a message) is in fact delegated by the senior to the junior partner. Group sessions offer opportunities for interaction, collaboration and the use of talk to explore children's understanding which are not available in a whole-class context. Teaching assistants, therefore, are working to overcome the limitations of the pedagogic strategies determined by the Literacy Hour. However, their assigned role in terms of supporting children who lack confidence, motivation or the necessary *savoir-faire* to engage fully with the prescribed objectives tends to reinforce the peripheral status reflected in their lack of involvement planning. It could be argued that the Framework within which they and teachers have to work rigidly circumscribes the respective roles they are able to adopt. Training, including the course of study these teaching assistants were following, does seem to enable them to reflect on this role and the possibilities for interpreting the role in more imaginative ways that take account of the immediate needs and responses of children. How well they are able to develop their role in the light of this will depend on the willingness of schools and individual teachers to allow possible encroachment on professional territory.

The teaching assistants in this study demonstrate a range of pedagogic strategies: reinterpreting, recapping, rehearsal, manipulation of resources to meet individual needs, providing opportunities for discussion. Time for these strategies is, however, limited by the imperative to 'deliver' the objectives and enable supported children to contribute to and participate in the same activities and achieve similar outcomes as the rest of the class. Teaching assistants seek to achieve this by keeping children on task, managing behaviour and facilitating the teacher's teaching. The absence in the accounts of any real sense of differentiation by either the teacher or the teaching assistant is significant. They are together essentially in a reactive situation; responding to children and to a tightly structured curriculum model and content. As Rees (1995) commented over ten years ago:

The assumption is that the assistant is able to think and react positively and carry out tasks in the way that the teacher might wish. The assistant is reactive rather than proactive

(Rees, 1995, p. 41).

They are at one and the same time peripheral to the lesson and, often through their own reactive endeavours, integral to it. As we have argued elsewhere (see Cable et al. 2006, Cable, 2004, Hancock and Eyres, 2004) for some children it would appear that participation simply would not happen or would happen to a much lesser extent but for the presence of teaching assistants. Their advocacy role for children is also clearly evident in our data, they validate what the children have achieved, they make the invisible visible to supported children, their peers and the teacher. Their role in the plenary session is a clear indication of this. They are helping to create the social conditions for learning in a structured approach to literacy learning

which otherwise seems to take little account of children's own experiences, their prior knowledge and understanding or their learning dispositions. There is much emphasis in the Primary National Strategy on learning styles and the need for adults to respond to these different learning styles to ensure participation. There is also a significant emphasis on inclusion and three 'principles' associated with developing a more inclusive curriculum are emphasised as statutory:

- Setting suitable learning challenges
- Responding to pupils' diverse learning needs
- Overcoming potential barriers to learning and assessment for individuals and groups of pupils

(DfES, 2002)

At one level the teaching assistants in our study are undoubtedly attempting to apply these principles. However, we would need to seriously question what the children they are most involved with would be doing or learning if assistants were not there. Would quiet children or those who lack confidence remain silent? Would bilingual children be able to develop the language repertoires they need? Would 'difficult to teach' children make learning difficult for others? Would children who find it difficult to concentrate or who need individual reassurance flounder? Would teachers be able to teach within the structure and framework of the Literacy Hour without their junior partners? For these children is the Literacy Hour 'a learning curriculum' (Claxton and Carr, 2004) enabling them to become learners? Will it enable children to develop the critical literacy that is an essential part of early learning (Hall, 1998)?

We have much to learn from what teaching assistants' own accounts of what they really do. We suggest that a re-evaluation of the knowledge and understanding (and training) needed to undertake this multi-faceted and critical role in supporting children's literacy (and numeracy) development is overdue.

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